

Theories and Methods in Linguistics

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## **isomorphism**

initially referring to the structuralist, in particular glossematic, hypothesis that the expression and meaning of linguistic signs show structural parallelisms, the term isomorphism is used in current linguistic theory to designate the one-to-one correspondence between expression and meaning.

### *Isomorphismus*

ursprünglich Bezeichnung für die strukturalistische, insbesondere glossematische Hypothese, dass die Ausdrucks- und Inhaltsseite von Sprachzeichen strukturelle Parallelen aufweisen, in der modernen Sprachwissenschaft dagegen für die Hypothese, dass ein Ausdruck genau eine Bedeutung hat.

The term *isomorphism* was borrowed from mathematics and is traditionally associated with the theory of glossematics, although L. HJELMSLEV himself never used the term in his writings. J. KURYŁOWICZ (1949: 48) adopts the term to designate structural parallelisms between the expression and meaning of linguistic signs: “On constate entre eux une ressemblance de forme, un *isomorphisme* profond”. KURYŁOWICZ (1949: 50-53) suggests, for example, that syllables and clauses can be structurally analysed in an analogous way. In the syllable, an autonomous, facultative onset *i* precedes the vocalic nucleus *V* and the coda *f*, yielding the structure *i* + (*V* + *f*); the corresponding structure in the clause is, according to the author, *subject* + (*verb* + *argument[s]*). Compared with this template, the Latin sentence *Pluit* ‘it rains’ is to be considered as a “forme moins développée, réduite” and syllables ending with *-ē* in various languages can be analysed as reduced forms of syllables ending with *-ek*, *-es*, *-er*, *-en*, etc. An important observation is made by N. EGE (1949). He believes that accepting *isomorphism* as a working hypothesis does not imply that the expression and meaning of linguistic signs actually correspond to each other: “les résultants de l’analyse ne se correspondent pas élément par élément; le parallélisme ne vaut que pour la méthode de l’analyse” (EGE 1949: 23). Apart from glossematicians, other structuralists were

willing to embrace *isomorphism* in one way or another as well. JAKOBSON (1958 / 1971), for instance, applied this hypothesis to the Russian case system, arguing that there are many structural parallels between the related case meanings and the corresponding phonological shape of the case endings. MARTINET (1957), however, is critical of the notion of *isomorphism*. His main objection is that the relation between expression and meaning is unidirectional and not bidirectional, i.e. that the meaning of a linguistic sign hinges upon its expression, but not the other way around (which was explicitly rejected by HJELMSLEV 1939 / 1971).

A fundamental turn in the understanding of *isomorphism* is brought about when JAKOBSON (1965 / 1971) invokes PEIRCE's concept of diagrammatic iconicity in order to criticize SAUSSURE's claim that linguistic signs are radically arbitrary. According to JAKOBSON (1965 / 1971: 350-352), the word order in Lat. *Veni, vidi, vici*, the morphology of *high – higher – highest* or *father, mother, brother*, the opposition between *je finis – nous finissons*, etc. invariably display an “isomorphic composition of the signans and signatum”. Ever since, *isomorphism* has been considered by many linguists to be not just a working hypothesis but a structural “iconic” principle inherent to linguistic signs, or series of linguistic signs. In the wake of this new interpretation, the concept of *isomorphism* has been extended also to historical linguistics. For instance, ANTTILA (1972: 89) writes: “language has a general iconic tendency whereby semantic sameness is reflected also by formal sameness”, which is considered proof of the force of *isomorphism*. It was HAIMAN (1980) who reduced the importance of complex signs in the use of the term and claimed that *isomorphism* applies to signs in general, including simple signs, with the result that in current linguistic theory, the term ordinarily designates the “one-to-one correspondence between the signans and the signatum” (HAIMAN 1980: 515). This use of the term is rather infelicitous, though, because it loses sight of the methodological assumptions underlying the original meaning of the term in modern 20th century linguistics. Moreover, in referring to what JAKOBSON called the “isomorphic composition of the signans and signatum”, HAIMAN no longer uses the term *isomorphism* but the (now common) term *motivation*, which designates a kind of iconicity.

## **Literature**

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